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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 HARARE 000228

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AF/S FOR S. HILL,
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU
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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR E. LOKEN AND L. DOBBINS
STATE PASS TO NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR B. PITTMAN

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SUBJECT: ELECTION UPDATE

REF: A) HARARE 206 B) PRETORIA 604 C) PRETORIA 348 D)

HARARE 175

Classified By: Ambassador James D. McGee for reason 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) A recent poll conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI) as well as observations by Embassy pre-election teams from throughout the country indicate strong and growing support for the MDC and its president, Morgan Tsvangirai. This is due in large part to increased antipathy toward Mugabe driven by a desperate economic situation, and a political environment which is significantly more open than in 2002 or 2005. President Robert Mugabe still enjoys substantial support, buttressed by the government machinery and government handouts, in rural areas.

Simba Makoni, despite early enthusiasm for his candidacy, has failed to develop significant support, except in Bulawayo and parts of Matabeleland. A runoff between Tsvangirai and Mugabe appears a real possibility. But with ZANU-PF rigging, including a manipulated registration process, potentially fraudulent postal voting, and a potentially flawed vote counting, tabulation and announcement process, Mugabe may be able to claim an outright victory on the first ballot. In the event he receives a plurality of the vote, Mugabe may claim that a runoff is not legally mandated. The atmosphere remains calm and we do not anticipate violence. END SUMMARY.

The MDC and the political Environment

¶2. (SBU) A poll conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute of Zimbabwe (MPOI) from March 3 to March 10 showed Tsvangirai supported by 29.5 percent of the sample of 1,200,

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Mugabe supported by 20.3 percent, and Makoni supported by 8. percent. 31 percent declined to state a preference, 4 percent said they didn't know who they would vote for, and 5 percent said they wouldn't vote. In an earlier poll conducted between February 22 and February 26, Mugabe led with 30 percent, followed by Tsvangirai with 28 percent, and Makoni with 12 percent. 30 percent declined to state a preference.

¶3. (C) Embassy officials, in pre-election trips throughout the country over the past two weeks, noted enthusiastic support for Tsvangirai. MDC candidates and officials with whom we talked universally attributed this to a calm and relaxed political atmosphere which stood in marked contrast to the environment in 2002 and 2005. Police for the most part were allowing the MDC to hold rallies and some had even confided to MDC activists that they hoped the MDC succeeded. We saw MDC posters in both rural and urban areas, and MDC officials told us ZANU-PF partisans were generally allowing them to stand, in part because the police were discouraging unlawful activities. We frequently saw MDC supporters wearing yellow T-shirts of the party and in some locals saw MDC and ZANU-PF supporters greeting each other as they marched past each other in opposite directions.

¶4. (SBU) Historically, many of the rural areas have been no-go destinations for the MDC. The MDC this time around has held relatively large rallies in a number of these areas, including the ZANU-PF heartland of Mashonaland. MDC officials told us that a number of traditional leaders in these areas, in recent times tools of ZANU-PF, were now supporting the MDC. The MDC attributes this support, and in general support throughout the country, to a desperate economic situation and the belief that ZANU-PF will do

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nothing to turn the economy around. The need for change is a refrain heard more and more.

¶5. (C) An example of the dynamic which is building support for the MDC comes from a trip we made to Mt. Darwin in Mashonaland East. Mt. Darwin West is the constituency of vice-president Joice Mujuru. The area has not benefited from the position of its important representative. We observed conditions as bad as anywhere in the country: a dilapidated infrastructure, including terrible roads, almost non-existent public transportation, absence of adequate food supplies, and malnourished children,

¶6. (C) While the atmosphere has improved, and support for the MDC is growing, significant problems continue. We have received occasional reports of kidnappings of MDC supporters and arrests of officials. In some areas, ZANU-PF has threatened small-plot farmers, resettled as part of the land reform program, with repossession of their land if ZANU-PF loses in their areas. Perhaps of most concern is food manipulation. With food stocks running low in many areas of the country and NGOs having suspended food deliveries during the election period, many people are dependent on the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) which has maize available at low prices. We have heard a number of reports that the GMB was selling maize only to traditional leaders loyal to ZANU-PF who were in turn expected to distribute it only to ZANU-PF followers. In addition to food, ZANU-PF has also distributed farm equipment such as ploughs and carts, in many rural areas as inducements for support

¶7. (C) Bulawayo and surrounding Matabeleland have been traditional strongholds of the MDC, but Tsvangirai appears weak in these areas. Tsvangirai held a rally in Bulawayo two weeks ago and reportedly drew upwards of 20,000 people, but our pre-election teams observed a lack of support for Tsvangirai. A recent MPOI focus group in Bulawayo found

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similar weakness. This is in part due to the MDC split. Several prominent Matabeleland politicians, who would have supported Tsvangirai had the MDC reunited, are now supporting Simba Makoni. Additionally, Dumiso Dabengwa, one of the principal Ndebeles in ZANU-PF, has broken with Mugabe and is publicly supporting Makoni.

A Note on MDC Finances and Organization

¶ 8. (C) We have received a number of reports that the MDC is receiving substantial support from South Africa. Specifically, MDC treasurer Roy Bennett told Embassy Pretoria (Ref C) that he had raised "significant" funds from Zimbabwean businessmen living in the diaspora and that he would provide US\$1000 for each MDC parliamentary candidate. Zimbabwean business magnate Strive Masiyiwa told Embassy Pretoria (Ref B) that he had provide substantial financial support to the MDC.

¶ 9. (C) In contrast to the representations of Bennett and Masiyiwa, Tsvangirai has told the Ambassador in recent conversations that the MDC is strapped for cash. And in our pre-election visits, virtually every MDC candidate with whom we talked told us they had received little or no financial support from the MDC. For example, in Mt. Darwin North, MDC candidate Timothy Mukwenge failed to meet our pre-election team at the agreed-upon time and place. They subsequently spotted him on the side of a road two hours later waiting for public transport. Without money, he had slept on the side of the road the night before and had not eaten. In Chipingi, MDC candidate Samson Sithole said the only support he had received from the MDC was less than US\$100. Campaign materials such as shirts and posters had not been sent from

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MDC headquarters in Harare. A small businessman, he told us he had been selling some of his business assets to finance his campaign. Sithole speculated that whatever money the MDC had in Harare it was using to finance the campaigns of MDC bigwigs. He had raised the issue of campaign support with MDC headquarters but found the central MDC disorganized and unresponsive.

ZANU-PF Machine in High Gear

¶ 10. (C) While there may be growing disenchantment with ZANU-PF, it continues to mobilize its rural base. Our pre-election teams observed numerous rallies around the country. Mugabe has been using helicopters, obviously unavailable to his opponents, to hopscotch the country and attend many of these rallies. At a rally in Lupane, a constituency in Matabeleland now held by the MDC, our observer estimated that over 20,000 people attended. We have received reports of large rallies elsewhere.

¶ 11. (C) ZANU-PF has committed considerable government resources to the campaign. The party has handed out food and agricultural equipment in the rural areas. Many ZANU-PF candidates are business people with independent resources that they have been using to gain support. The government mouthpiece The Herald touts on a daily basis Mugabe's efforts to develop the country. Front page articles this week described government housing construction and rehabilitation of a power station. Inside on a daily basis are several full page advertisements for Mugabe. Television and radio are similarly supportive. And of course most of the media coverage of the opposition is partisan rather than objective.

Simba's Star Fades

¶12. (C) Makoni's entry into the presidential race generated excitement, but he has failed to build support. This is in part because, with the exception of Dumiso Dabengwa, no ZANU-PF heavyweights are publicly supporting him; and because he is relatively unknown outside of Harare, Bulawayo and his homebase of Manicaland. He is now viewed as the candidate of the intelligentsia and the shrinking middle class.

Interlocutors in the rural areas who were aware of him and who were anti-Mugabe were suspicious of the fact that his roots were in ZANU-PF and that he had not disavowed the party. Some thought he might be a ZANU-PF plant to confuse the race. He is widely seen as arrogant and aloof; one of our pre-election observers was told that after a rally Makoni and his people refused to offer transport to attendees to the nearby town.

¶13. (C) Makoni's principal role in the election may be as a spoiler. As noted, he has strength among the middle class and intelligentsia, both centered in Harare, and he can be expected to pull support from the MDC and Tsvangirai in the capital. With the support of MDC Mutambara faction candidates in Bulawayo and Matabeleland, he has demonstrated some strength in these areas, primarily at the expense of Tsvangirai.

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¶14. (C) Although ZANU-PF heavyweights such as Solomon Mujuru who support Makoni have not come out publicly, they are working for him behind the scenes. It is likely that in Mashonaland and, to a lesser extent in Midlands and Masvingo, Makoni will draw support from Mugabe.

The Great Equalizer--Rigging

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¶15. (C) The potential for election rigging continues to be a concern. Focus is now on the registration process, polling stations, and the counting and tabulation of votes. In 2005, there were 5.6 million registered voters. For this election, there are over 5.9 million, despite a continuing exodus of Zimbabweans. In a diplomatic briefing on March 20 attended by the Ambassador, Tsvangirai said the MDC had conducted an audit of the voter rolls in 28 rural constituencies that revealed 90,000 ghost voters. Tsvangirai alleged that 600,000 ballots had been printed for postal voting (military, police, election officials, overseas diplomats are eligible) when the maximum number of postal votes would be under 200,000.

¶16. (C) This week, Mubabe amended the Electoral Laws Amendment Act passed as part of the SADC mediation process, which eliminated police as persons who could be present in polling stations. The new amendment allows them to be present and requires their presence when electoral officials are assisting illiterate or physically disabled voters. The Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) and the MDC have protested--so far to no avail.

¶17. (C) ZESN expects to have observers at all the country's polling stations. Votes for president will be counted at each polling station and then will be tabulated at constituency and provincial centers. From the provincial centers, totals will be sent to a central command center in Harare. To date, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) officials have made no provision for observers at the tabulation center or at the command center.

Legal Complications of a Runoff

¶18. (C) The Electoral Act requires a runoff when there are

two or more candidates and no candidate for president receives over 50 percent of the vote. The Second Schedule to the Act which expands and amplifies on the Act, states that where there are two or more candidates for president, the candidates with the greatest number of votes is elected. Since there has never been a presidential election where a runoff was a possibility, nobody realized that the Electoral Act contained this apparent contradiction. When queried about this, the ZEC has deferred to the courts. It is not unrealistic to believe that if Mugabe emerged from the election with a plurality of the votes, he would argue that the Second Schedule is controlling.

Comment

¶19. (C) Because polling is difficult in Zimbabwe, and because in the MPOI poll a high percentage of the sample declined to respond, we believe it should be read for trends rather than accuracy. It does comport with our on the ground observations that Tsvangirai and the MDC have widespread support, that Mugabe continues to have significant support, and that Makoni significantly trails the other two. Even in a non-rigged election it would be foolish to write Mugabe off; his liberation credentials and his skillful use of the ZANU-PF machinery to manipulate voters continues to result in considerable backing. If rigging can be limited, a runoff is likely. With a significant amount of rigging, Mugabe may manage to claim more than 50 percent of the vote.

¶20. (C) The atmosphere continues to be remarkably tranquil. While this could be the calm before the storm, we see nothing

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to indicate that the election will result in widespread violence, although isolated incidents are always a possibility. The most likely scenario for violence would be a Mugabe defeat. Notwithstanding the inflammatory statements of Zimbabwe Defense Forces Commander Constantine Chiwenga, Police Commission Augustine Chihuri, and the head of the Zimbabwe Prisons Services, Paradzayi Zimondi, that they would not respect a result in which Mugabe was not reelected, we do not believe that a Mugabe defeat would produce violence. The aforementioned individuals do not enjoy great support among the rank and file, and a significant number of ZANU-PF officials, including Solomon Mujuru, Air Force Marshal Perence Shiri, and Army Commander Philip Sibanda, would like to see Mugabe go, even if he is replaced by Tsvangirai.

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